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Writing Aussie horror: an interview with Shayne Armstrong and Shane Krause

By Mark David Ryan

Shane Krause and Shayne Armstrong are the screenwriting partnership behind the chiller *Acolytes* (Jon Hewitt, 2008) about consequences three teenagers' face after discovering a body and attempting to blackmail a serial-killer into killing a rapist – shortlisted for the 2007 Queensland Premier's Literary Awards and nominated for the prestigious 2008 AWGIE (Australian Writers' Guild) Awardⁱ for best Original Feature Film. With Australian horror films experiencing a major renaissance in recent years, I caught up with Shane and Shayne to get an inside look at writing horror flicks in Australia: how they work together as a screenwriting partnership (penning numerous dark genre scripts in development or circulation among producers); why attitudes towards the genre are changing; what they see as barriers to a sustained local horror industry; and other issues.

First of all, as writers, what attracts you to genre writing and the horror genre in particular?

Krause: *They're naturally stories that we're attracted to in the first place. It's not just horror we love suspense – the creation of tension and making things unsettling without showing a hell of a lot. So it's the visceral responses that you can get from such stories. Some people are drawn to comedy and what a huge response that is to get people to*

laugh; for us, it's irrational to get unsettled and afraid through imagery and sound effects and that's what attracts – the power to be able to do that.

Armstrong: *One thing we're interested in, and it's in several of our scripts, is what characters will do when placed under stress. The true test of character is when you're placed in a life or death situation, and quite often what people will do to each other in our scripts is far worse than what our creature or villain would do to them anyway because it comes into a sense of betrayal which is worse.*

How do you work together as a writing partnership, what is the process?

Armstrong: *The way the process works from the beginning is we'll have more or less an idea for a concept which might originate from a scene, an idea, a character, or something that we've read that's inspired a new story, and then we kind of, over a period of time, just talk about it between ourselves to develop it into something more tangible. Then the time comes when we sit down to do quite detailed scene breakdowns which makes the writing easier and faster. We divvy it up and go away and write separately, passing the different sections back and forth. We often try different models, sometimes twenty pages each, and other times we split it right down the middle, half each, and then we kind of go to and fro to keep the consistency of the material together. We need to be together to do scene breakdowns, it's just an absolute requirement to be across the table from each other. But when we go back to script changes from that scene breakdown, we*

can be continents apart because we know what the story is, and what we're doing with the script.

Krause: *That goes back to knowing each other since we were kids – we've been working together for a long time.*

So tell me about some of your scripts and how did *Acolytes* get to where it is now?

Krause: *The first dark genre script that Shayne and I wrote came from a novella written by Greg Boylan [Brisbane-based dark-fiction writer] called Kraal – that was the one that we got in the hands of a couple of Brisbane producers, Richard Stewart and Penny Wall. They flogged it around the world and it kept looking like this one was going to get over the line, and that's what the producers kept telling us, only to see it collapse. In the meantime, writers have to keep writing even though producers would love for you to sit on the one project and write a thousand drafts of it. We don't do that. We go onto another project. Otherwise we're basically idle or wind up writing for producers. So we wrote *Acolytes* which started back in the early 1990s, and that's when we first started talking about it, so that's how long the gestation periods for some of these projects can be.*

We knocked out thirty pages in the mid-1990s and then just put it away, I don't know why we started thinking about it three to four years ago, but we did, and we slowly put a draft together that probably took eighteen months. That was given to the same producers and funnily enough it got over the line while Kraal is still in development. So you just never

know, that's why writers need a lot of projects because you have no idea what's actually going to get up or not. You really can't tell. Shayne and I don't try second-guessing the market anymore. We're always bemused by it.

So your focus as a writing partnership is spec-scripts?

Armstrong: *Yeah, they're all spec-scripts. I studied advertising at the Queensland University of Technology so I've made my living as a freelance copywriter, I teach part-time at the University of Queensland, and different things. Shane's done freelance writing for television shows and animation and we both do a bit of freelance consulting for kid's cable channels.*

Krause: *You know they're things that come in that we really don't go out pursuing. With our material now we've got word-of-mouth in a couple of countries so we receive a bit of work and some of that turns into pay packets. We agree to do it because generally it's kind of interesting work and we're lucky enough that it's generally in kid's TV. The good thing about kid's TV is that there's a lot of genre material done, whereas in Australia you don't really find horror, sci-fi or fantasy really represented for a prime-time adult audience. So the kid's stuff is not a bad fit even though we're left to our own devices as dark genre writers. With a script we recently completed, morning sessions were for our property, and in the afternoon it was freelance. So that's how we've done it to support our original screenplays.*

Some of your scripts appear to be written for an international audience, why is that?

Because markets for horror are international, or because the Australian industry hasn't been receptive to horror in the past?

Armstrong: *I think good horror is international, it doesn't have to be dependent on a setting, and in the cases where we've actually written an Australian-based story, it just happens to be the case that the story suits Australia though not all horror does that. Vampires set in Australia or werewolves like in The Howling III (Philippe Mora, 1987), while they can happen in any country, it just seems a little 'try-hard' within an Australian context – but landscape horror, the idea of serial killers or people being deranged in the outback, that suits us. So you've got to find the right angle. So I think if you're serious about setting a horror film in Australia, then you have to actually know what will work, what won't, and what is frightening and tense about Australia? Then what that is has to of course be scary to an international audience. The Host (Joon-ho Bong, 2006) [Korea], The Ring (Gore Verbinski, 2002) [Japanese-inspired United States remake], The Blair Witch Project (Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) [United States], or Dog Soldiers (Neil Marshall, 2002) [United Kingdom], they're all from different countries, but people from around the world will still get scared by these films.*

In terms of producers, what has driven the interest in your scripts in recent years? Is it because the horror genre's 'hot'?

Krause: *I guess producers are becoming more receptive to that kind of material. We went down to Sydney with two screenplays and we had been working on Kraal and it wasn't even finished. It looked like it was finished – the physical document on the table – and if you read it, you'd definitely see that it wasn't finished, but we took it down anyway. We had another project there, which was a traditional Australian film, kind of a World War Two drama, and that was the one I was more confident in and we had about twenty producers lined up to see over a week. This was about five years ago and I didn't want to take the horror film out of the suitcase. I felt embarrassed talking about it to Australian producers, and Shayne kept kicking me under the table and urged me to do it. It finally came out of the suitcase and that was the one, that at every meeting, producers were more interested in as soon as we started talking about it – that was a real eye opener.*

The reason was that producers could hear, “oh yeah, I could actually make this. I don't need \$100 million”. You know horror traditionally come from low budgets which is why lots of first-time filmmakers make horror films, because they can. They're either shot in one location or they use amateurs actors, and it's usually physical over CG [computer generated] effects. That was the first thing, that “hang on, I could probably find the money for this”, and secondly, it actually sounds like an interesting story. Maybe Australian producers over the last few years have also realized they can't be so insular. They need to find money from overseas and to do that they need a project understood and appreciated overseas by whoever funds these things.

Armstrong: *What often happens with a funding body, a distributor or producer, some people are attracted to something – we found this a couple of times with our projects – because it seems different and ‘out-of-the-box’. But once things start moving, once money starts getting involved, people start making risk assessments and they sometimes start to reshape it into something more conventional. So that can make it feel like they’re shaved the edges off something that was once quite edgy and different.*

From your experience, what are some of the ‘issues’ that you are up against as Australian horror writers?

Armstrong: *For a long time, there was funding body indifference or in the case of PFTC [Pacific Film and Television Commission] blatant hostility towards horror films. And beyond that you’ve got agencies getting hands on and interfering with material as well – trying to interfere with the creative direction of things and that’s something we’re very resistant about.*

In the early 2000s, people also turned their nose up because of some Australian horror films up to that point. Cut (Kimble Rendall, 2000) was just abysmal and that was heralded as the [next] big Australian horror film. It had a slight bit of ‘hoo-ha’ about it and it was just terrible. It did terribly at the box office, critically ‘shat-on’, and it did absolutely no service to Australian horror.

Krause: *Yeah, so there was a bit of audience suspicion towards the genre in Australia back then as well.*

Armstrong: *One before that was Bloodmoon (Alec Mills, 1990). I actually saw that six times at the cinema, you saw it seven times Shane, and we only paid for it once because they did kind of a William Castle thing where they had a 'fright break'. At the climax they just stopped the movie and said if you're too scared to watch the conclusion – "Run, run now to the box office and get your money back!" And we did that six times. It was a chicken break and we used to make chicken noises running out of there.*

But that creates an impression of Australian horror films. We're both big horror fans and eventually a few years later, became credited horror writers, and we're making fun of an Australian horror film by running out making chicken noises. So general distrust from an audience has been an issue for local horror films in the past and sometimes well deserved.

Krause: *A lot of guys [emerging screenwriters and filmmakers] like serial killers, but a lot of those people get into the genre because they're fans. The challenge then is, ok, if they want to pursue those horror archetypes, how can you make those archetypes work in an Australian context, and that's difficult. I think it can, but it takes someone pretty damn talented and determined to make those archetypes work in Australia. We both think something like 28 Days Later (Danny Boyle, 2002) could have worked in an Australian setting. Why could it have worked in London, but not Sydney for example?*

Since *Acolytes* has been produced have development funds started flowing?

Krause: *No, not really, we go back a-long-way with some funding agencies. We write stuff off our own back because we don't want meddling in the writing process. We're fine after a script is written, but we don't like to be molested in the actual writing stage to get up to a release draft. If you take a funding agency's money that's what will happen in some places more than others. We've been through that with some scripts early on and we don't want to go near it again.*

Armstrong: *What Acolytes has done is put us back on the radar of the funding bodies, and it's opened doors for agents to be more receptive towards us.*

ⁱ The Australian Writers' Guild annual awards for excellence in screen, television, stage and radio writing.